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ABSTRACT

There is valid criticism that contest debate practices constitute both a reality gap between contest debate and actual public communication, and a closed feedback loop among coaches, judges, and debaters. However, remedial and preventive action is possible if forensics directors are highly motivated to work within a broad program of communication skills and are thus willing to become salesmen in the school and the community for their product: informed and skilled communicators. Among the many possible resource activities are oral interpretation activities involving prose and poetry reading in schools, presentations for civic clubs and school assemblies, and community programs for shut-ins, the blind, rest homes, the underprivileged, and the handicapped; extemporaneous activities in social studies classes and community events; parliamentary procedure activities in various organized groups; debate activities; public address activities; and discussion activities. (JM)

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THE HIGH SCHOOL FORENSIC PROGRAM:

RESOURCE FOR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

by

Maridell Fryar and Charles N. Wise

In the past several years numerous articles have appeared criticising contest debate practices. A particular article by Wayne Brockriede characterised the relationship between contest debate and actual public communication as a "Reality Gap."[1] Although Brockriede's points have been gently disputed by at least two authors,[2] other authors have agreed with and extended Brockriede's analysis.[3] The authors have universally been college level teachers and coaches, but the implications of their writings extend easily to high school debating. To put it all bluntly, "contest debaters sound, talk, and act funny," when compared with either (1) our immediate past cool, rational model of argumentative discourse, or (2) the here-and-now, youthful model of public argument, variously referred to as "body rhetoric" or "the rhetoric of protest." To Brockriede and others, current happenings in the contest room represent an unfortunate perversion of the earlier model or a lack of possibly necessary adaptation to the newer model.

Causes of the reality gap in contest debate, at least at the college levels, have been treated by several authors already cited. A prime cause, in our opinion, may have been the creation of a "closed feedback loop." With respect to contest debate, coaches, judges and debaters appear to talk only to other coaches, judges and debaters. For example, in

the "NDT", or national debate tournament for college debaters, only people who have judged a certain number of rounds in the current year are eligible to judge. Technically speaking, a retired speech communication teacher with forty years of contest experience, or even the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court would not be qualified to judge. Separate funding outside of departmental budgets,[4] lack of information about contest activities among the faculty at large, and the development of "elitist" group behavior by members of debate squads[5] are further manifestations of a closed feedback loop. All reinforce a "divorce" of contest debate from persons, activities, and considerations not directly and immediately connected with contest debate, lending credence to charges previously noted.

It is not the purpose of this paper to attempt further exploration of the reality gap problem or its causes. We generally accept the conclusions reached in the literature. We do not believe, however, that the problem and its results are irreversible or require radical changes. Accordingly, we are concerned with remedial and preventive action, particularly at the high school level. Our concern extends to the total contest program operative at this level, since problems that affect contest debating can easily propagate to other contest activities. Thus, the paper has two purposes: (1) drawing primarily upon the senior author's experiences, we offer a modus operandi for high school forensics programs that seems, in our opinion, to help bridge the "reality gap"; and (2) by suggesting these procedures and practices, we will provide some practical suggestions for young high school forensics directors who seem constantly seeking such direction. The latter purpose is not unique, of course, but a public sharing of experiences seems periodically appropriate.

Assumptions

Several assumptions have guided the paper. First,

the projects and programs outlined are based primarily on the senior author's eight years of experience as forensics director in a large Texas high school. The student body numbers approximately twenty-two hundred, one of two such high schools in a city of seventy thousand. The active speech squad usually numbers from thirty to forty students. Consequently, many of the ideas presented will have to be adapted for use in smaller schools and communities. However, the basic principles upon which these programs are built should prove valid in any environment.

The second assumption is that the forensics director has as his primary role the teaching of speech curriculum and the directing of contest activities on an extracurricular level. Again, if such is not the case, adaptation may be necessary.

A final, perhaps the most basic assumption, is that the forensics director is highly motivated to make a program in skills of communication available on as broad a level as possible and is therefore willing to work many hours promoting the activities suggested.

Basic Attitudes

It is a truism to say that "attitudes" are extremely important in a healthy, growing forensics program. It must, nonetheless, be said. Specifically, without the proper attitudes toward forensics and toward change in forensics, no problems can be solved.

Brooks Quimby, writing from the vantage point of forty years as a forensics director, in an article entitled, "Is Directing of Forensics a Profession?", said:

> . . . our salvation lies in the realization that we do, or at least should, belong to that noblest of professions, education. To establish this, we must prove that we are not

> merely trainers who seek to perfect some special skill, but that we are educators developing broader potentialities of our students.[6]

John M. Watkins, writing in the Junior College Journal, went further to point out:

> Obviously, the value of a speech squad rests in areas far beyond the speech tournament and speech award. . . . It balances when the competitive speech squad is recognized as a vehicle through which the squad member . . . (becomes) . . . an evaluative thinker and expressive contributor to his college and profession.[7]

Finally, Dr. William E. Buys and James M. Copeland, in their book, Speech Activities in the High School: A Non-Competitive Approach, indicate:

> One of the conditions of an effective school curriculum is that it relates to, serves and compliments the community in which it exists and, at the same time, that it carry forward national cultural, economic, political and social goals.[8]

Each of these writers is expressing two basic challenges to the forensics director: first, to realize that he has a responsibility to help his class and contest students put into broad practice the skills they possess; and second, that he must help his faculty colleagues become aware of the possibilities of enrichment for their own classes through the forensic squad. If the "closed feedback loop" conception does account for some of the reality gap problem, seeking out other faculty members and their students will have the additional benefit of opening the loop, with mutual gains. In essence, the

forensics director must become a "salesman" for the product of his instruction: informed and skillful communicators.

Establishing Contacts

Forensics directors are seldom unaware of the wide variety of possible aids the speech squad can offer to the school and community. However, the comment is frequently heard among these directors, "Oh, my school isn't interested in the use of my students," or "Why don't civic clubs use my speech squad?" The answer may well lie in the adage, "Toot your own horn!"

Certainly, no matter how well planned and prepared, a speech program which is secret can hardly be useful to the school or to the community, nor, for that matter, to the program itself. The forensic director has the responsibility of making known to those whom he wishes to serve that he is willing to do so.

Faculty Contact

Support and enthusiasm for the goals and objectives of the speech program is a factor well worth working for. A fundamental step in achieving such support is information. The forensics director must inform his faculty colleagues of his willingness to assist with class activities, and of the variety of programs and projects with which the speech squad may assist. Initial conferences with principals, counselors, and department heads is necessary to establish lines of communication and understanding. Rather obviously, these procedures must all be done with the proper attitude of "offering to share able students," rather than an attitude that "other teachers are deficient." Our experience has been that once a faculty becomes truly aware of the possibilities, there are more requests than can be met.

Ask the principal to give you a few minutes of the opening faculty meeting. Prepare a concise statement of what you want to do, and invite interested teachers to meet with you briefly. A brochure or other printed matter can be prepared in advance, specifying those things you would be willing to do in particular disciplines. If a general announcement is not practical, ask to meet with teachers in each department during the "In-Service" meetings which precede the opening of school. Don't overlook the practical value of informal conversation in the Teachers' Lounge! Inform teachers in all areas. Tell them what you believe the speech students can do for these teachers' own instructional objectives.

One further means of gaining support among the faculty is to allow them to assist in some of the forensics squad activities. We have found, with others, that indifference or even opposition to the competitive program by some teachers can be overcome when they actually see what the speech activities are.[9] Asking various teachers to attend practice debates, to take a speech trip with the squad, or to judge in the tournament held on your own campus -- all have been means of building up a backlog of "teacher cheerleaders" for the forensics squad. In turn, it is these teachers who first open the doors of their classrooms to the squad members, and who are highly vocal about the value of such sessions. The teachers and their students will also be effective "backchecks" upon the "reality" of speech performance.

Information to the community is equally necessary. This can usually be achieved by written or oral communication with club presidents or active members. Often the names of such clubs and their officers are available through local organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Newcomers' Club, or the newspaper. Teachers, administrators, and parents of speech students will probably be involved in local civic clubs, further strengthening contacts initiating in schools.

Resource Activities

The following list of possible activities is not meant to be exhaustive. Most of them are the result of our personal experiences and, in our judgment, have been tried and proven. Some are taken from the writings of others, as noted. The real purpose of such a list is to "prime the pump" and get the reader to lend his own creativity in devising others.

Oral Interpretation Activities

1. Ask English teachers to submit a time schedule for the study of poetry in their classes, specifying particular poets or themes which they would like to have presented by oral interpretation students. Be sure to give your students ample time to prepare a presentation so that it will be of superior quality. Such an experience will give students involved in contest work a motivation for using their skills in other situations than those specified for a particular tournament. The experience will also show students the practical value of the interpretative skills they have learned. English teachers have especially found visiting interpreters to be a motivational tool when used to introduce a unit of poetry study, particularly with a slow class. The experience of hearing some of his peers read and enjoy poetry often has a motivating effect on the reluctant student. A thematic presentation with the use of special lighting and visual effects can occasionally be presented in the school theater to several classes simultaneously.

2. Prose reading can be done in the same manner. Prose reading is especially effective with the study of non-fiction, an area which sometimes lacks the initial appeal of fiction.

3. The forensics director should encourage his students to be aware of units in their other classes where skills in interpretation can be used. If a contest student is reluctant to volunteer his own services, encourage him to ask other squad members

to volunteer. When one English teacher complained of students who just could not seem to "get the hang" of poetry, members of the oral interpretation squad set up special tutorial sessions, with gratifying success.

4. The school or public library can often use speech students to publicize new volumes through "reading hours." Students choose selections from new books and read them orally to an audience. Library users are exposed to new books and speech students read a variety of materials to diverse audiences. "Regular scheduling of a reading hour will help it grow in popularity."[10] Such an activity could be profitably scheduled in conjunction with the annual National Library Week.

5. The director should be certain that the school official who plans school assemblies is aware of the interest value of using oral interpretation, reader's theater, or combinations of both. Programs utilizing original student writing, in combination with music, can be especially successful.

6. Use of oral interpretation students for presentations at civic clubs is especially fruitful, particularly during special seasons such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter. Some clubs, who would not be receptive to debates or current events, will often enjoy literary programs.

7. The forensics director should investigate special needs within the community. In one community, a tape lending library for the blind made extensive use of oral interpretation students to record short stories, poems, and even novels. Programs for shut-ins and rest homes can be organized with materials which have already been prepared. Day camps, nursery centers for the underprivileged, and opportunity centers for the mentally handicapped are always in need of skillful storytellers and readers.

Extemporaneous Speaking Activities

1. Interest in current events within social

studies and history classes can be heightened, and extemporaneous speakers can get valuable experience, with the following activity. On Monday, the social studies class compiles a list of current topics, based on assigned reading. Each day for the remainder of the week, a student from the contest class reports to the social studies classroom, draws a topic, and uses thirty minutes of the class time to prepare his topic as a speech, while the class goes on with regular work. At the end of thirty minutes, the speaker presents his speech to the class. Following the speech, the social studies teacher conducts a short forum on the topic. The social studies students are encouraged to ask the speaker questions, comment on his content or delivery, and react to the communication situation generally. The activity is done at irregular intervals, according to desires of the social studies teacher. Eventually, the social studies students are asked to give speeches themselves, so that another group of students learns how to speak better.

2. In the community, take extemporaneous speakers to clubs such as Toastmasters and Toastmistresses, since these clubs have speaking skills as their primary interest. Adults are asked in advance of the meeting to select current topics. Students draw these topics at the start of the meeting, and retire to another room for preparation. Following regular club business the speeches are given. These groups will be consistently impressed with high school students able to organize and present speeches after such a short time of formal preparation, and the groups also serve as valuable feedback sources. Such reinforced groups also constitute willing "pools" of contest help.

Parliamentary Procedure Activities

1. Members of the speech squad can act as resource and demonstration groups for the Student Council and other campus clubs. Such activity is especially valuable at the beginning of the school year,

particularly in large schools where there may often be as many as ninety study council representatives, many of whom have had no experience with parliamentary procedure. Consultation with the student council sponsor might bring about Parliamentary Law workshops prior to the first school meeting of the council.

2. The forensics director can, with the government teacher, team teach a unit on Parliamentary Procedure prior to the government class's Mock Congress and Mock Trial.

3. Speech squad members can be used as the prosecuting and defense "attorneys" in government classes' mock trials.

4. Vocational groups (FHA, FFA, ICT, and VOE) can be given special help in preparing parliamentary procedure demonstrations to be presented at their respective conventions.

5. The forensics director can prepare a simplified parliamentary procedure outline and make it available to club sponsors and classroom teachers.

Debate Activities

1. Debates can be presented by the speech squad each year in a variety of classes. Each fall, the forensics director should inform all faculty about the national high school topic, and should indicate a willingness to have debate teams present debates before classes. Since the topic always falls within the interest of the social studies classes, such classes are most likely participants.

2. Not all debate presentations need to be on the national topic. In a history class, students can be selected to represent important historical figures. Each student can do research on the position that his assigned (or chosen) historical personage took on some important issue. After "casting," hold a debate between the opposing forces. The class, as observors, can critique the participants on the historical accuracy of their positions.[11]

3. In an English class, students can represent

different literary critics who disagree on certain authors and their works. For example, "Did William Shakespeare actually write the works attributed to him?" The audience can act as a forum, ask questions, and challenge the speakers during or following the debate. Students can also be assigned to represent the viewpoints of various fictional characters in debating a philosophical or ethical question.[12]

4. English classes, especially on the senior level, can use debates to help English students see a practical application (or misapplication) of the demonstration explaining rudimentary principles of debate. Employment of some type of "Shift of Opinion" ballot will promote involvement in the English students, and such involvement should in turn stimulate the debaters.

5. The forensics director should encourage other teachers to make use of debate by their own students. Debate is an especially good teaching device for highly controversial topics in science (such as evolution) and in philosophy.[13]

6. An important service the forensics director can perform for colleagues is the preparation of a simplified "How to Debate" explanation of the use of debate in class.

7. Civic groups, such as the League of Women Voters, P. T. A., and the Bar Association, will regularly desire debaters for programs. These groups, as well as many others, are particularly interested in hearing debates, and usually want to hear the national topic. From such groups, as well as Toastmasters and Toastmistresses, a nucleus of well-informed lay judges can be built up in the community.

Public Address Activities

1. The forensics director should make his services available to the school at large for tutorial help to students involved in speaking situations such as school elections, graduation speeches, and banquets. Unless speech is a required subject, this availability of the

speech teacher may be the only contact that many students have with speech instruction of any kind.

2. The forensics director should also have devised some very basic printed material on the speech outline, which he can make readily available to other faculty members or to students.

3. "Some schools operate a Speaker's Bureau. The names of students with well-prepared speeches are listed in a printed brochure which is then circulated to local groups."[14]

Discussion Activities

1. "There are many organizations in the school and community composed of high school students. Organize a 'group dynamics consultation service.'"[15] Such a service would be available to provide help in improving the operation of such organizations, despite obvious limitations to the amound and quality of aid which can be handled effectively by high school students.

2. "If there has been a discussion on some problems related to the interests of the community (i.e., does our community need a civic center?), arrange to have speech students present the discussion on one of the local broadcasting facilities. Work out the format to be used with the program director of the station."[16]

3. Prepare a simple outline of the discussion sequence to make available to teachers who may want to use discussion groups in their own classes.

Conclusion

When a director of forensics becomes a channel through which his students can provide enrichment to both the school and the community, he is then providing for them the true goal of education, the means of becoming a useful citizen. Not only does the experience meet the needs of the student, but it also

gives the community an insight into one phase of the modern educational experience and fosters an appreciation for that experience.

The activities suggested in this paper will not only enable the forensics director to provide such enrichment, but they should also help minimize any "reality gap" which may exist between contest speaking and communication situations outside the contest environment. Such activities should certainly assure that coaches, judges, and contestants will be interacting with wider and more diversified audiences about contest debate and other contest activities.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Wayne Brockriede, "College Debate and the Reality Gap," Speaker and Gavel, VII (March, 1970), No. 3, 71-76.

[2] Theodore J. Walwick and R. Samuel Mehrley, "Intercollegiate Debate: An Intrapersonal View," The Speech Teacher, XX (September, 1971), No. 2, 192-94.

[3] John S. Nelson, "That Reality Gap and the Rhetoric of Distortion," Speaker and Gavel, XVIII (March, 1971), 73-79. Richard Crawford, "A Proposition Revolt in Intercollegiate Debate," Western Speech, XXXV (Spring, 1971), 116-23.

[4] Several surveys of the source and amounts of forensic funds have shown such a trend, suggesting a possible lessening of interaction between forensics directors and their colleagues, which might include less dialogue on philosophy, methodologies, and scheduling.

[5] The subject of an upcoming convention paper by Wise and Fryar, "The Reality Gap in Contest Debate: A Learning Theory and Group Communication Approach."

[6] "Is Directing of Forensics a Profession?" The Speech Teacher, XII (January, 1963), No. 1, 41-42.

[7] "Your Best Representative," Junior College Journal, XXXVIII (April, 1968), No. 7, 37.

[8] Speech Activities in the High School: A Non-Competitive Approach (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1967), 12.

[9] Watkins.

[10] Buys and Copeland, p. 76.

[11] Ibid., p. 52.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Nathan Lilienthal, "The Case for Debate," School Activities, XXXIII (April, 1962), No. 8, 241.

[14] Indiana State Department of Public Instruction, Teacher's Guide to High School Speech, (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana State Department of Public Instruction, 1966), 220.

[15] Buys and Copeland, p. 63.

[16] Ibid., p. 64.